

What are you talking about?

There's a contemporary choral music composer I like a lot called Eric Whitacre. He writes closely harmonised, quiet chord progressions that literally shimmer in the ear –very accessible, but always modern. If we had some media toys here I'd play a few bars that I guarantee would knock you out.

Whitacre produced something called the Virtual Choir, where he's used YouTube to collect individual voices singing by themselves – they download their voices, then he uses technology to mix the voices and create a recording. If you hunt him down on YouTube, you can get his lecture about how he does this, and he tells his own story.

When he was young, he wanted to be – a rock star. He had a band. He had charisma. He has surfer-dude good looks. But he wanted to go to college, so he goes down to the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and enrolled. A friend tells him to come join the university choir. He said you'd really enjoy it, and besides, you really should check out some of the sopranos. So he turns up at practice, takes a place right up there with the tenors, and someone hands him the music, which he's never seen before. Up goes the baton.

Now -- they're rehearsing Mozart's Requiem. It's the second movement, the Kyrie. The baton goes down, the choir starts up and

Whamo. Thunderbolt. It turned his life upside down.

Whitacre says I had never heard or been a part of anything like that in my life. He's overwhelmed. Within a year, he's majoring in music, studying composition, and within a couple of years, his stuff is being published. That one choir practice is the beginning of an internationally successful composing career, creating moments of pure beauty for millions of people.

And when he talks about that afternoon, you can feel the magic of that blinding moment of transformation.

I don't know about you, but for me, life doesn't have near enough of that kind of stuff. I remember the night my first daughter was born, driving back home from the hospital in Tokyo. I'm on my way to call our families on the other side of the world to tell them that I was a father for the first time, and I remember still thinking I'd never felt that kind of rush before and might never again. I was ten feet tall, and bulletproof.

For some people, religious conversion is like that. But that's not really the norm, I think. Most Christians come to faith in much more tame and incremental ways. You grow up in a

believing household, and your faith grows as you do – in fits and starts. Or you start asking the meaning of life questions, and someone whom you connect with talks with you about faith and Jesus. My guess – it's only that – is that this would be a pretty empty room if to get a ticket you had to have a road-to-Damascus flash.

And that's surely not a bad thing. Being constantly pumped is not so sustainable. If you expect the high all the time, sooner or later you're going to be disappointed. Trust me on this: I don't start every day bounding out of bed saying I'm a father, I'm a father WOWOWOWOW.

But I never really doubt that I'm a father. Eric Whitacre probably never questions that he's a composer. Believers, on the other hand, don't always stay so confident about their belief. Faith has its ups and downs, and sometimes when you feel you need it most, it's not there. Now I'm not talking about you all – I'm sure you're fine, but my subject today is doubt.

There are all kinds of ways faith gets smacked down. Loss and grief really do get in the way of believing that there's order in the universe and a kind God is looking after you. Horrible illness or tragedy makes it hard to feel the love. There's lots more prosaic challenges to faith as well. God gives us knowledge and reason and want us to use them, but that can make a Bible-grounded view of the world seem a little odd sometimes. How was the world really created? When I think I feel the presence of a higher being, am I just kidding myself – playing mind games?

And what happens when you just stop – I don't know, caring, about being a believer? Worship is flat, church is a burden, your fellow man is a pretty hard guy to love, work is meaningless, and your life seems so flat that a caring God is nowhere to be found. Or your life is going so well that you don't seem to need faith – we're just doing fine by ourselves here, you know – let's keep enjoying it.

It's disorienting, doubt is. I think it's a bit like this: if you drew two parallel lines 10 centimeters apart across the floor here, you could walk comfortably between those lines without the proverbial second thought. Move that space up to chest height, and suddenly you're a lot less sure of yourself. That's called a balance beam – it's a gymnastics device. Move it up a hundred feet, and most of us wouldn't try to cross it on a bet. Losing faith can be that way. If you don't know that the floor is on the side, it's hard to keep your balance.

There's a play that was turned into a movie a few years ago called *Doubt*. It's about a conflict between a parish priest and the nun who runs the Catholic school in the neighbourhood, and her suspicions about what the priest may be getting up to with at least one of the altar boys. Meryl Streep is the nun – all hidebound tradition and judgement, and Phillip Seymour Hoffmann is the priest – all warmth and charisma and you know who you're supposed to be siding with, but the question is tested throughout the film as the story plays out.

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And at the end, a young nun played by Amy Adams finds Meryl Streep in the garden sitting, and she says, sister, do you still doubt him? And Meryl Streep says, with a shadow crossing her face – it's a wonder to watch her work – I have doubts, Sister. I have such doubts. And suddenly you see how much is going on in this test of wills between the two and how her faith is being tested in so many ways. And it's failing. And you suddenly flash back to everything you remember in the film and see it differently. Her shell of strength turns out to be paper thin, cause she's missing her anchor, and she is lost.

Is it unfair to ask why God lets that happen to us? Theologians talk about our having a God-shaped hole in our consciousness, an innate need to believe and be grounded in something. There's plenty of evidence of a doubt-shaped hole in there as well. And sometimes it can be pretty big. Why is that? If faith is supposed to save us, why is it so hard sometimes?

Now there's lots of directions we could go with this, most of which are way beyond the scope of a 45-minute sermon. Why do bad things happen to good people? How do you climb out of the hole when you get there? But I want to just think about one little corner of this question. Is it really meant to be this hard? Is faith meant to come easy, and stick with you like fatherhood or musical talent?

Because if it is, then what do you think when you find yourself up on that balance beam alone? You think: what's wrong with me? Other Christians get this – why don't I? Have I been kidding myself about being saved, or about needing to be saved from anything? So I want to take a few minutes with our story to think about whether God means this faith journey to be a simple one.

So.

Two guys are walking along the road on a dusty spring afternoon, a couple of miles south of Jerusalem. They're going home. They've been up to the City for the holidays, and they've never had a holiday weekend like that. They'd heard about this rabbi up north who seemed way different from any of the other teachers or priests they'd come across, and he too came down for the festival.

They'd heard the rumors about the healing, and how strange and different his teaching was. They'd met him – we don't know where or when – and were very impressed. And when he came into the City, surrounded by people – ok, it was on a donkey, but still – they wondered like everyone else, has the Messiah, the promised, come along at last? We thought it was the Maccabees a hundred years ago, and that didn't last, but this one is very different. Every time he argues with the priests or the scholars, or even the romans, they always come off the losers.

So at last, he's going to ride in, rally the rebellion, gather his people around him and restore our people to the glory of King David's times. We'll have our land back, our freedom back, and it'll all be different.

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It didn't work out that way, and they don't understand why. And as they walk along, rehashing all this, suddenly there's someone there, and he asks them a question -- he says

What are you talking about?

Sorry?

I overheard you speaking – what are you talking about?

Well, we're talking about what everyone is talking about. Don't pretend you haven't heard – we thought he was the Messiah, come to save us, but he came to the festival, and they lynched him. I've never seen a crowd like that – it was terrifying. Even the Romans and the police couldn't handle the mob – they just threw up their hands and executed him, just like the crowd wanted. He's gone. It wasn't him. We're not saved after all. It was all just a tired dream.

But then, just as we have to go home, we start to hear that he's been seen. In person. Alive. So we don't know what to think – we're just going to go back home to our jobs and try to forget that it ever happened.

You see, as they walk along, wrestling with their doubts, someone is with them. They aren't alone. Maybe he's sharing in the conversation, maybe he's just listening, being a presence. We don't know.

But we do know this – and this is the bit I love

He doesn't tell them who he is. He doesn't go – voila! Here's the reveal! The punch line! It's me!

He doesn't make it *easy* on them, does he?

Yes, Jesus did say that his yoke is easy and his burden light, but he also said a lot of other things about how hard it was going to be to follow him sometimes. He calls the path to salvation narrow, and says that many won't get there. He talks in particular about how hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom. He tells the disciples in John's gospel that he knows how hard it will be for them when he is gone, and that he'd send what he calls a comforter so they won't have to do this on their own.

No, I don't think we're promised that this is supposed to be easy. Not all the time. And I don't think there's anything wrong with us when it seems like a long way down from that beam. But Jesus didn't let these two travellers wrestle with this on their own, did he?

One of my favourite prayers comes from the father of the boy who was healed in the 9th chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus says that all things are possible to those who believe, and dad says I do believe, help thou my unbelief. Isn't that great? Doesn't that capture a lot – I believe, help thou my unbelief.

And there he is with Cleopas and his friend, and without telling them who he is, Jesus starts explaining how the Hebrew Scriptures, their cultural story, all point to a crucified and resurrected messiah. And -- he rebukes them. It's a mild rebuke, but it's there.

In English, "What are you talking about" comes in two flavours. It can mean the straightforward question that Jesus starts with. It also can be like the rebuke he moves on to – What are you talking about? Don't you remember that this is the way the prophets said the Christ had to suffer?

And they still don't know who's walking along with them. Because that's not what Jesus is helping them work through. They come back to understanding, to believing, without knowing exactly how they're being helped or who exactly is helping them. Could he have made it easier on them by letting them in on the secret a bit earlier? Sure. But that's not the path he chooses for them to work this one through.

It's only after they ask him to stay through supper and he breaks bread with them that they realise – kind of mysteriously – who he is. Then he disappears.

And the light bulb goes on. Didn't our hearts burn within us when he talked to us? Of course. Not only were they not alone, but it was Jesus himself who was walking with them. And as the story closes, they immediately return to Jerusalem. They have work to do there. Their faith is restored – they want back in the game.

What are we talking about? Do we think that this is all supposed to be easy? There's a lot I don't know about the fragility of faith, and a lot I don't know about why those threatening demons that attack it are there in the first place. And that's not for lack of thinking about it either. You know the last verse of Amazing Grace, right? When we've been there ten thousand years, we'll still be praising God like the day we got there? I actually think I'm still going to be asking God a few questions, and I bet I'm in a long line, too.

But here's what I do believe. When we're walking along that long road, or standing up there on the beam and worrying about our balance, and we think we're alone,

We're wrong.